

Series: HANDLE WITH CARE!—May 4, 2008

**WHEN THE LORD'S SUPPER GETS DANGEROUS!
1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

I. INTRO

A. When I was growing up, the really *spiritual* churches—you know, the churches who were *right*, would've been *totally* scandalized by the fact that we serve coffee, tea and cookies after our services!. And Lord knows it wasn't because they were against caffeine and sugar. It was a problem of *where*. If, in fact, churches even *had* fellowship halls (fellowship is the church word for *hanging out with friends*) they were separate from the church. The best way to do it was to have the fellowship hall across the parking lot. Of course, if that wasn't possible, you *could* have both the sanctuary and the fellowship hall near each other—just so they didn't touch!

1. Want to know what Bible passage they got this whole ridiculous thing from? I'll read it for you—from the King James Version of the Bible:

What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?...And if any man hunger, let him eat at home; that ye come not together unto condemnation. (1 Corinthians 11:22, 34 KJV)

They took this to mean, *Don't eat where you worship...or you may DIE!*

-I don't know *who* initially came up with the crazy idea that it was wrong to eat in church—but a *whole* bunch of people totally missed the point of this whole passage.

And the Corinthians, the people these words were initially written to—*missed* the point of The Lord's Supper.

-It's easy to do, isn't it? To miss totally miss the point in things. To make work about prestige, to make money about accumulation, to make a home into a showcase, to turn a wedding into a fashion show. We do that all the time.

2. *Missing the point* becomes lethal when it gets into the spiritual arena. And it happens. It's happened to me—I mean, sometimes I have been *so* far off in my motivation in serving God. And maybe you, too. Creating rules—and re-arranging buildings always seems to be easier than dealing with heart issues—like spiritual pride, prejudice, snobbery—and apathy.

B. Celebrating Communion—or the Lord's Supper is one of those sacred moments between us and Jesus—when we remember, again, his kindness and peace and grace and love—and forgiveness. It's intended as a time to change our hearts—soften them. Realign our priorities.

1. The evidence of a changed heart and realigned priorities is love. Not in how we love our friends or our family—but whether our love actively extends beyond our own little circle and includes the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned—and those who are just, well, not easy to love; the socially awkward.

-Does it ever get to those who smell like sweat and can't speak our language?
Does it ever get to those who don't trust us or like us?
Does it cross racial barriers, social barriers, weight barriers and class barriers?

2. Here's the deal. Snobbery, contempt, and disregard for others—in a holy place, like the Lord's Supper—can apparently be downright unhealthy. Even lethal.
-So! I'd say we need to talk about this, don't you?

II. **DANGEROUS...FOR US!**

- A. Last week I completely centered in on the Lord's Supper—and what it truly means for the world. What I *didn't* talk at length about is the mess the people in Corinth (the book we've been studying) had made of it. See if you can guess how the Apostle Paul, early church leader and founder of this church, feels about what's happening.

But in the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together. First, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who have God's approval will be recognized! When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this! (1 Corinthians 11:17-22 NLT)

-Paul is angry. Frustrated. Steamed!

1. Let me give a little background so that this makes sense. This church did not meet in one big building like most churches today. Instead they met in each other's homes--typically in the homes of wealthy persons because they were big enough. These homes, between the dining room and courtyard, could hold 40 to 60 people.

-Now, these kinds of gatherings happened all the time in their culture—usually for guilds or business associations or other organizations to socialize and network with each other. The followers of Jesus simply adjusted this custom to fit church gatherings.

-Something else. People in Corinth were extremely class conscious. Free people didn't mix with slaves and the rich didn't hang out with the poor. And when it came to social gatherings like these—people declared who they were and how much they had by what **kind** of food they brought—and how **much** they brought. As people arrived, the patron who was hosting the feast would assign seats based on class and social prominence. People of social distinction got seats at the head table; the rest had to use plastic forks, hold their Styrofoam plates in their laps and eat in the courtyard.

2. The followers of Jesus apparently held these gatherings on Sunday, the first day of week. We typically get Sunday's off. They didn't. The wealthier free people could come early for the **love feast**—as they called them—bringing the best food and wine with them.

-So, they would get seated in the main dining room as the special guests.

They would have a couple of hours together networking, eating, drinking wine, and basking in the favor of their host.

-The poorer people arrived late because of having to work longer hours. All they could afford were bologna sandwiches and Kraft dinner---or maybe nothing at all. Meanwhile, the socially privileged guests would be porking out on the last of the prime rib au jus and shrimp scampi. With the best seats already taken, they were forced out to the courtyard to eat what little they'd brought with them.

See what happened? Little by little, the same old customs from their culture slipped right into the most sacred of times. The tragedy of it all is that the slaves and poor were treated like that at **every** social gathering—and now **this** one, centered around Jesus—was no better.

3. Some of you have personally experienced some of this kind of prejudice and classism yourself. You know what it feels like to be humiliated and marginalized.

-Here's the irony of the situation in this church. Jesus gave his life to **end** barriers--superiority, first class and second class and third class; He broke down the barriers between slave and free—majority and minority—between rich and poor, blue collar and white collar, male and female. At the very ceremony that celebrated that—these people were **rebuilding** the walls!

-And when **anyone** does that, they have to dis-member the cross to do it--recreating the very evil systems of segregation Jesus died to destroy. And **that's** what was going on in this church Paul is writing to. **That's** why he says, "I have absolutely no praise for you. Your worship does more harm than good!"

- B. Anyone here ever felt marginalized? Humiliated? I don't have a clue as to what some people go through almost every day of their lives.

*Working for an employer that screams at them and embarrasses them—knowing they can't afford to quit.

*Standing on a street in downtown Toronto holding a cup—and being ignored. Having nothing—and having to go to a food bank for help. Having to beg welfare to help you. Looking for a job and being told, no! no! no! **No!**

1. Slavery raised the ante. Imagine being **owned** by someone else. In that culture, to be a slave—to be of the poor working class—was to be kicked around. You were **nothing**. You got the leftovers. To be honest, **no one** wanted to be you! You were born into poverty—you would die in it.
2. And when that happens—over time, that's all you expect. When you get kicked every day of your life—you **expect** to get kicked. You lose hope, you lose your dignity, you lose any sense of being a valued member of the human race—and a child of God.

-Here's the strange thing; when you're on the **other** side of that barrier—among the favored, the successful, the honored—you **actually** begin to think you deserve it.

- And you whine when you **don't** get what you think are your rights.
3. And **Jesus** says, "Not here! Not among **my** people! You had better not bring that trash into my church—when I died to kill that stuff—all the hatred and snobbery and humiliation and contempt once for all!" And **that's** why this stuff, when it showed up at the communion table, infuriated Paul and brought God's discipline upon the people.

-See, the Lord's Supper is the symbol of oneness, the symbol of no more walls between slave and free, Jews and Greeks, male and female. Love, consideration, kindness, patience, gentleness are **all** to be hallmarks of the church! And when it's not? When the barriers get re-erected and people get marginalized? It mocks Jesus and everything He stood for. Jesus' cross made it clear that we are all alienated from God; we **all** need to be redeemed—and we're **all** equally valuable to the One who runs the universe! God, through Jesus, **humbled** Himself. That leaves absolutely no place for pride or class or prejudice or bossing around among his people—**ever**.

-But it's sneaky stuff, isn't it? In a world that worships and exalts appearance and success and achievement and degrees and titles and money and stuff—we get drawn back into that same attitude like skunks to garbage.

-Sometimes it even gets into our efforts to help the poor and the marginalized and diseased—where instead seeing them as equals—as brothers and sisters in a very unequal, prejudiced world—we see them as objects of pity.

And then we judge others as inferior because they don't do what **we're** doing. If we're not careful, pride and contempt and self-righteousness creeps into the **best** we offer—and contaminates it.

4. Here's the deal. God hates racism, snobbery, smugness, marginalization and contempt—in any form. It doesn't matter if it's toward the poor and the broken—or toward the wealthy—or toward politicians you don't agree with. God can't stand prejudice.

-Something else. God has a huge soft spot in his heart toward the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the invisible—anyone who struggles to find anyone to stand up on their behalf. Just before He died, Jesus gave a message about the final judgment—and he compared it to a shepherd separating sheep from goats.

He made it clear that when we feed the hungry, give drinks to the thirsty—invite strangers into our homes, clothe the naked, and comfort those who are sick and in prison—we're doing it for **Him**. And when we refuse to help—or worse—marginalize and humiliate and ignore those in need? The vulnerable? Well, we're doing **that** to Him as well.

-There is apparently an accountability—not just for meanness and cruelty—but for ignorance. Apathy. Just turning away. Do you see why this was such a huge thing in this church? Jesus is hidden among the poor; the needy; the marginalized. This church, with at the supper held in Jesus' honor—was treating Him with contempt at the same meal!

- C. Paul's warning final warning here to the people involved in humiliating the poor has an edge to it. Hold onto your seats:

So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died. But if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way. Yet when we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:27-32 NLT)

1. This passage has scared some people half to death about even **taking** communion. They think, "If I take this bread and cup unworthily—it could make me sick—or **kill** me! It's not worth the risk. Question: How many of you think that it's **possible** to be worthy of communion—worthy of grace? That's the whole point of grace!
-Let me tell you first what this **doesn't** mean. It doesn't mean that we need to go over our moral report card with a fine-tooth comb. The specific issue is eating the bread and drinking the cup—all the while thinking that it doesn't make any difference **how** you treat people Jesus loves and considers as your equal. It's quite simple; when you or I humiliate, marginalize, slander or vent on others in the Body of Christ, we're doing that to Jesus.
2. A lot of times when people are going through difficult things, the thought crosses their mind, "Maybe God's punishing me?" Let me talk about that a little.

-The truth is, sometimes bad things happen to us because we live in a broken world—filled with broken people. God does some of his best work redeeming awful situations for **good**.

-And sometimes we just do dumb things. Drive fast and you'll get a ticket. Plant dandelions—you grow dandelions.

-But sometimes we fall into sloppy, dangerous patterns of life, and we put our soul—and maybe our whole family in jeopardy. God has to stop us; wake us up, because we're asleep at the wheel. He usually tries speaking first. But if we won't listen—sometimes God allows discipline. That's what this passage is saying.

But if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way. Yet when we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:31-32 NLT). I've been disciplined by God—and I've learned something profound. **Listening is easier!** Hey—are you **listening?**

3. Here's the lesson we need to learn from all of Bible history—and from this specific instance—for our own good, really. From what Jesus says—how we treat others says **volumes** about our relationship with God.

-So be **careful**. Drag racism, prejudice, contempt, snobbery or apathy around with you—and it could make taking communion a dangerous thing!

III. DANGEROUS...FOR THE WORLD!

A. Now, the last thing we want to do is put warning labels on Communion: ***This could be hazardous to your health!*** So. I have an idea. Why not turn the tables on this thing? Instead of the Lord's Supper being dangerous for us—I think it could make us dangerous people. Dangerously good and kind and generous and peaceful. Dangerous to the world system that promotes oppression and the whole hierarchy the separates people into the worthy and the unworthy. See, that's what the church through the ages has been like in its finest moments.

1. If, when we take the Lord's Supper, we remember that His life is ours, His mission is our mission and His power is now our power—we could do a **lot** of damage with that! Jesus said that the very gates of hell itself wouldn't be able to hold back his people and his mission. But when you look at his life, he never used his power to blow things up. Besides teaching and healing—love, acceptance and grace were his main weapons in breaking down barriers.

-Right after he instituted communion—and washed their feet, listen to what Jesus said:

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” (John 13:34-35 NLT)

-Anyone pick up on what Jesus' weapon of choice is? Love. Jesus was saying, “I want you to be the most loving group in the world!” And that's what he says to us, right here, at The Olive Branch. You don't have to be the smartest, the prettiest, richest people—just the most loving.

-Knowing what I know about Jesus, I think He would take it further. I think he would say, “By the way, I'm betting the farm on this. Everyone will know that you are Mine, that you've got My stamp, that you've got My signature—you are My disciples, My students, My people—if they look at you and say, **This is the most loving group I know!** If you're like that—you will be **unstoppable!**

2. When Jesus' people have been at their very best—the sign over their lives has been, **Everybody's Welcome!** Know why? Because that's what Jesus was like! It was scandalous—at least to the religious authorities. He would welcome, love, accept, embrace, help, include **anybody** who came to Him. It didn't matter if they were prostitutes, thugs, tax collectors, lepers—even the oppressors, the Roman centurions—all were welcome. And Jesus got hammered for it!

-After Jesus' resurrection—when the Spirit of God and when Jesus died and was resurrected—and the Spirit came on this community—it became a place that had **never** existed before. Everyone was welcome.

See, the world has always had people who live on the margins—people no one had much use for. But, see, Jesus came, washed feet, did things only slaves would do. His followers remembered that. So, they said to the slaves, “You’re welcome here!”

- a. When you look into the historical record outside of the Bible—it’s fascinating! In 140 AD, an historian named Aristides said, **any slaves they may have among them, they persuade to become Christians because of their love toward them. They become brothers without discrimination!**
 - b. Another historian named Pliny, arrested some female Christian slaves and was amazed—and alarmed to find out that they were **leaders** in the church! He wrote a letter to the emperor saying, **Many persons of every age, every status and also of both sexes are at risk of joining the church.** He added, “I think we can stop this thing!”
3. When followers of Jesus put up the sign for the poor, “**Everyone’s Welcome!**”—it rocked the world. One emperor said, **I think that when the poor were overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans [Christians] noticed how the poor were being overlooked and devoted themselves to benevolence.**

-This emperor, Julian the Apostate, was ripped because Christians didn’t just care for their own poor—they supported the Empire’s poor as well. In some cases, followers of Jesus would fast 2 days so they would have food to give to the poor who came. Friends—this community was **dangerous!** The world had never seen anything like it!

4. In 165 AD and again in 250 AD, plagues in the Roman Empire wiped out about a quarter of the city’s population. Listen to what this historian writes: **At the first onset of the disease of the plague they (meaning the general population) pushed the sufferers away and they fled from their dearest (spouses, children) throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt.**

-But, you see, Jesus never did that. So His people went into the roads, picked up the sick and took them into their homes where they would bathe them and clothe them and feed them—and sometimes die with them. Now—this church wasn’t perfect. In fact, Christianity turned into a religion—and went on to wreak havoc on the world. But these early followers really tried to do what Jesus said. Strange thing is—the Christians survived the plagues at much higher rates than the general population!

5. I believe that God’s calling on the church—on us—the people of Jesus--at this juncture of history is to **actively** engage in being God’s emissaries of love in our world. In the world that swirls around us every day—where, like the Good Samaritan, we look for the person who’s right in our path. We don’t step around them or over them—we stop—and we show love in practical ways. -I think we can do better than that. The early church was had a lot of limitations we don’t have.

The Good Samaritan traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho would be a little more like one of us flying to Hong Kong, or Manila. We have to look beyond our own world. See, we have to ask questions like, “are the people who made these clothes treated like slaves—or treated with dignity?” There are **so** many ways to engage, to advocate for the poor, to stop slavery, to rescue kids from prostitution—to help families escape poverty.

-God **so** loved the world—He gave. And He wants to love the world through us. Not cry a tear and mumble a prayer—but engage in the need of a world desperate for Jesus—desperate for **dangerous** love! See—that’s our heritage! And love says something powerful about Who Jesus is—and what He’s like!

- B. This little band of people, with their sign, ***Everybody’s Welcome!*** were dangerously loving and compassionate and generous people. Like us, they were also imperfect. They had their squabbles and divisions; sometimes they forgot who they were—and what time it was. But over time, the way they loved transformed the world of their day.
1. Think that could happen again? Today? Think God could take all the barriers of our world—and turn them upside down ***right here?*** That we could be the kind of people that insist on being equals—brother and sister—not just inside this building, but in our world. Where we could say, ***This is where all labels and prejudice and racism and social barriers stop. Right here where the cross is driven into the ground! We will NOT be like that. -Slavery? Oppression? Injustice? We’ve had it—and we’re not going to stand for it.*** Stupid poverty—where children can’t eat or get basic medicine or have decent drinking water? In Jesus’ name—that has to stop. People need a chance to live—and when they have that chance we want them to look ***up!***
 2. I mean, really, what ***do*** you think? Think God could still create an irresistibly loving community like that? Or do you think we’re destined to wallow in the self-pre-occupation and self-centeredness our world says is okay—aimlessly walking the malls looking for more stuff to buy?
-Think there could once again be a Jesus community so relentlessly and sacrificially loving that people who thought they should give up on church—people who thought they would never even want to be in the same room with people who are different—racially, culturally, economically, sexually, morally—that people like that would say of us, Jesus’ followers, ***I’m not sure I agree with everything they believe. I’m not sure I even understand everything they teach, but I want to get loved like that!***
- Think God could do that in us? In you—right down in the recesses of your heart? Does ***my*** life say, “Everybody’s Welcome!” Would the people who know me say that—that I really do love someone besides myself and my family—and it pours out of the way I talk, my body language, by the way I engage—by the way I give of myself? Is that true of me? And is that true of you?
3. That’s what this table, the Lord’s Supper, represents, friends. God who stooped to love us—to give ***everything away for us***—including his life. When we take bread—his body, and when we take wine, his blood—what we’re saying is, “I’m in. Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs. I’m ***one*** with you, Jesus; I’m ***one*** with your mission. No snobbery. Not prejudice. No holding back. Your life—is my life. Your mission—is my mission.

-And when **that** happens—well, then this simple act of communion gets dangerous—for the sake of the world; for **Jesus** sake!

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. You may be wondering about the red coming down—covering the communion table. Is it just a cool, nifty decorating trick? It's intended to remind us that God's love runs red. It cost God to love us to Himself. All through history—you see this thin red line of blood—sacrifice—leading right to the cross. One last sacrifice.

-The red reminds us of the value God places on us. And it reminds us of the value God places on the others in this world. It's quite simple. He asks us to value them...too.

- B. It **costs** to love. To love and honor and respect and help others. At this table we accept God's call to love the world.